

November 11, 2009

As we celebrate Veterans' Day this year, it's important to remember that while we may be divided on where we stand on the war, this nation must be united in seeing that our soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines are welcomed home with all the compassion this grateful nation can muster. Supporting our troops is a mandate – not a slogan. This Congress has taken many steps to help our troops, our veterans and their families during this economic crisis.

Congress has passed critical measures to expand educational opportunities and provide veterans economic relief. As part of the Recovery Act, we provided nearly 2 million disabled veterans a \$250 payment to help make ends meet. We also passed the GI bill, which was sponsored by Senator Webb of Virginia in the Senate, and which I pushed through the House as Chairman of the Appropriations Committee. That bill provided the biggest expansion of education benefits for GI's since the passage of the original GI Bill in 1944. The new Post 9-11 GI Bill provides veterans a four-year college education, allowing up to 2 million soldiers of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts to be part of a new American economic recovery. And because veterans are coming home to double digit unemployment, Congress has enacted incentives to help veterans operating their own businesses and to encourage American businesses to hire unemployed veterans. Finally, to help our service-members who have literally served above and beyond the call of duty, the Appropriations Committee led the way in enacting a special payment of \$500 a month for every month that a soldier had their enlistment involuntarily extended by the practice of Stop Loss since 2001.

On the healthcare front, this year's veterans' budget provides the largest funding increase for health care and other services ever requested by a President – even more than veterans' organizations requested.

In fact, since I've been Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, we've increased investment in veterans' health care and other veterans' services by over 60 percent – including the largest single increase in the 78-year history of the VA. To deal with the influx of veterans created by two wars and embarrassing wait times for veterans' medical services around the country, Congress increased veterans' healthcare funding alone by more than 40 percent in the last three years. That funding has strengthened health care for more than five million veterans, and added over 17,000 new doctors and nurses, and more Community-Based Outpatient Clinics and Veterans Centers.

What that means for veterans is hopefully better health care and shorter waiting times for their medical services. It also means more resources for VA mental health care services, which more and more of our troops coming home with mental and physical injuries – like traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder – will need.

And by providing advanced appropriations - a top priority of many veterans' groups - Congress

acted to ensure that the veterans' health care system receives sufficient, timely and predictable funding so that the VA can plan for and provide the best care for America's wounded warriors.

But at the end of the day, it's important to remember that this isn't just about dollars and programs, it's about respect. Veterans have always been respected by Congress, in our hearts and our words. But we need to show our respect through deeds as well. When it comes to veterans, the moral principle is very simple. Our nation should keep its promises to those who stepped up to serve their country, no questions asked.